

ALDOUS HUXLEY: HUMANIST AND MYSTIC
THE REVOLT AGAINST THE REASON
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY
WILSON McNEIL LOWRY
A.B., University of Illinois, 1934

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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The Revolt against the Reason in the Twentieth Century

The impact of the World War on the consciousness of British writers served to accelerate the destruction of a more or less unified set of traditional beliefs which had in the past served the artist in his major task of communication. Hardly any 20th century English writer of importance can be studied without reference to the absence of common philosophical and moral assumptions underlying modern literary thought. I have studied the works of Aldous Huxley from the point of view of one traditional source of values in the development of Western European culture—the values which attend a naturalistic and humanistic view of the world as found, for example, in the great French skeptic, Michel de Montaigne. At one period in his literary career, Aldous Huxley gave direction and significance to his work by means of a point of view about life which stems originally from the humanistic tradition of the Renaissance. Subsequently he abandoned the attempt at a humanistic synthesis for a mystical, and later a quietistic, world view. In so far as Aldous Huxley's movement from humanism to quietism denies the supremacy of the individual in the realm of ethics, I consider such a movement in the light of a revolt against the reason. A revolt against the reason is a widespread phenomenon in the 20th century, detectable in the worship of a deified race or nation in contemporary totalitarian ideologies, in the Freudian emphasis on the unconscious rather than the conscious mind, in the collectivist subordination of the individual to the group, in the explicit denial of the instrumental reason made by modern behavioristic psychology, in the subordination of the individual to the ethic of the machine, and in the evident emphasis on methodology rather than on end or purpose which characterizes the

20th century attitude towards knowledge. The artist contributes to the phenomenon of anti-rational revolt when he denies the paramount importance of the individual and considers the problem of value from some superhuman or sub-human vantage point. Such a development is the main current I detect in the ideas of Aldous Huxley over a period of the last decade, and my thesis consists of an analysis of its terms.

The work of Aldous Huxley from the beginnings to 1926 reveals a man who is completely at home only in the life of the intellect. Temperament and training alike conspired to make Huxley an intellectual highbrow *par excellence*. Reaching maturity in a post-war world which had lost most of its grip upon traditional sources of value, Huxley was ideally suited to become the mocking, clever, disillusioned representative of the so-called "lost generation." Like many of his fictional characters, Huxley found his "emancipation" from traditional values a source both of freedom and of disillusionment. Most of the critics of Huxley's early work consider him merely mocking and irreverent. But a careful study of that work reveals that Huxley could not remain a merely ironic spectator of life. Many of the activities of his own generation frankly horrified him. We are conscious of nothing in his early work so much as of an extreme fastidiousness of taste. Though we understand Huxley's very good reasons for attacking modern education and the phenomena of the movies and the radio in the contemporary world, we often cannot avoid being astonished at the sheer vehemence of his attack. It scarcely seems possible that a 17th century Puritan could have found bull-baiting or mumming more repugnant than Huxley has found the modern amusements of the masses. And this native fastidiousness in Huxley soon made itself felt in the realm of ethics. There is a remarkable difference in tone between the humorous raillery of *Crome Yellow* and the moral indignation of *Antic Hay*. To Huxley, the members of his own generation were more "lost" than they knew. He sincerely believed that 20th century civilization was in a stage

of decay, and his brilliant erudition enabled him to present the case for this belief convincingly.

Though no systematic point of view is developed by Huxley until *Point Counter Point* (1928) and *Do What You Will* (1929), we are yet conscious in *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) of a rather consistent center from which Huxley's satire is aimed. The characters whom Huxley attacks in these two novels bear many resemblances to those people in *Point Counter Point* who are assailed for being something less than human or striving to become something more. Furthermore, the ideas in Huxley's books to 1926 which seem most immediately personal to their author are those which advocate reforms by means of the directing intelligence. By 1926 Huxley was no longer satisfied merely to record the devastating effects on his generation of the loss of integrating and directing values. He began the search for meaning and value which has occupied him henceforth. In *Jesting Pilate* (1926), he emphasizes both the diversity and the unity which are to be detected in man's experience. Though he returns from his intellectual jaunt around the world with a profound appreciation of relativism in all things, he yet asserts that there exist certain fundamentally *human* values, values which it is folly to try to justify by logic alone. With the perversion of these values, there can, he says, be no compromise.

Upon Huxley's attempt to form a humanistic synthesis in *Point Counter Point* and *Do What You Will* the work of his friend, D. H. Lawrence, had an influence which the student of Huxley must take into account. The character of Rampion in *Point Counter Point* is definitely modelled upon D. H. Lawrence, and Rampion is Huxley's fictional spokesman for many ideas which form part of the "life-worship" creed of *Do What You Will*. But the influence of Lawrence upon Huxley's ideas at this period is in a certain sense indirect. There is no real attempt at a humanistic balance in Lawrence's ideas, and there is in Huxley's doctrine at this period nothing of Lawrence's mystical cultivation of the unconscious. *Point Counter Point* is Huxley's attempt to reach a truly humanistic ethic by graft-

ing upon his native skepticism, his inherent intellectual detachment, something of Lawrence's belief in the life of the body, of the instinct. Always gifted in self-analysis, Huxley recognized his own tendency towards an excessive cultivation of the intellect. A humanistic synthesis demanded a balance of mind and body, of the conscious and the unconscious. It was to Lawrence that Huxley turned for an understanding of the rich life of the body and instinct. But Huxley takes only enough of Lawrence's cultivation of the body to create a humanistic synthesis. The detached pyrrhonism of Philip Quarles, the character in *Point Counter Point* who is modelled upon Huxley's own temperament, illustrates how determinedly Huxley had to struggle to accept even a codified, rationalized version of Lawrence's ideas.

Rampion is used in *Point Counter Point* as a representative of the "life-worship" doctrine explained in *Do What You Will*. The latter book is the most detailed reconstruction Huxley has given us of his humanistic position. The humanistic ethos presented here rests upon metaphysical assumptions concerning the rich diversity of human experience and the incapacity of man to have knowledge of absolutes. Unity and diversity are "facts" which are equally "true." Scientific theories are "true" in so far as they rest on sense impressions which are roughly the same for all individuals, but metaphysical world views are all equally "true" or "false," since they have their origin in the individual's desire to rationalize his own experience. Even in the same individual, fluctuating moods, circumstances, states of mental or physical being, will cause him to have varying conceptions of the real. Our lives, then, are made up of discontinuous states of being. Reality, for each of us, is discrete and varied. We are almost forced to live discontinuously and inconsistently. But the *conscious* man is also aware of the "fact" of unity. He recognizes that there exists, however subject to diverse influences and constructed of varying components, the fluid continuum of the self.

In accordance with such metaphysical assumptions as these, Huxley develops the humanistic ethics of his "life-

worshipper." He condemns the pursuance of any one course of behavior open to a diverse personality to the exclusion of all other courses. The only immoral act is an act against life, against the integrity of the self which allows for the expression of the mind and of the body, of conscious intellectual life and instinctive, visceral life. Like Montaigne, Huxley believes that man is neither an angel nor a beast. The end of living is life; not death, not the Other World, but life. The men who have attempted to live only like angels, denying all the claims of the body, have succeeded in living like beasts. It is the attempt by Lucy Tantamount, Spandrell, Burlap, Illidge, and other characters in *Point Counter Point* to be something more or something less than human which makes them unfailing marks for Huxley's satire through the medium of Rampion.

The difficulties which Philip Quarles experiences in *Point Counter Point* in attempting to embrace Rampion's rather robust creed of "life-worship" perhaps indicate that Aldous Huxley was incapacitated by his temperament to maintain a humanistic view of life. A naturalistic humanism like Montaigne's demands a well-conceived harmony of mind and body, a harmony so close that the actual dualism of mind and body is fused in an intimate view of the correspondence of all parts of man's being in Nature. Huxley has always been excessively conscious of the claims of pure intellect, and this element in his temperament accounts at least in part for his abandonment of humanism after 1935. Of equal, if not of greater, importance in Huxley's surrender of a humanistic view of life is his increasing horror in the thirties over the religion of nationalism and the threatened destruction of civilization by war. Though Huxley had always been severely critical of 20th century culture, he became more and more concerned over the possibility of its collapse in the wake of a new world conflagration. In an article called "The Problem of Faith" in 1933, he rejected four possible creeds open to his contemporaries—supernaturalism, nationalism, socialism, and the idea of progress. In place of these he pled for a faith in what he called a "pessimistic humanism," but he showed himself aware of

the great difficulties involved in portraying a philosophy of reason in the terms of that unreason which alone seems able to arouse popular conviction. In *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934), Huxley soberly questions the possibility of deflecting into harmless channels the movement of his contemporaries towards nationalistic hysteria. And by 1936 he had become associated with the pacifistic movement originated by Canon H. R. L. Sheppard, the movement which by this date had become the Peace Pledge Union. The first official pamphlet of the Union, "What Are You Going to Do About It?", was written by Aldous Huxley in 1936. For the first time in his career, Aldous Huxley had left the position of a detached spectator of life for the sphere of action within a group.

It is in terms of this background that we must examine the new point of view adopted by Huxley in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) and *Ends and Means* (1937). In the latter book, as in *Do What You Will* eight years earlier, Huxley is preoccupied with the question of unity and diversity, but he approaches it now in an entirely different manner. The fact of diversity is inescapable, but the contemporary research of the physical scientists has shown us an ultimate physical identity underlying the world. What appear to be independent existents are actually interdependent. Furthermore, recent research in medicine, experimental psychology, hypnotism, and telepathy has shown the existence of an underlying identity of mind, just as the trained mystics have obtained direct experience of a spiritual unity underlying independent consciousness. Our craving for meaning may justify us in positing the existence of some integrating principle in the universe. Final conviction, Huxley admits, can come only to those who make an act of faith, but this act of faith is no more difficult intrinsically than that which the scientist makes when he assumes that the laws of thought are also laws of things. Huxley is not concerned with the problem of faith in a personal God. Ultimate reality, as the experience of even the orthodox Christian mystics has often shown, is not personal but a spiritual reality far beyond personality. Nothing, indeed, can be predi-

cated of it, and it is impossible to attribute ethical qualities to it. Huxley's new ethics, in his own mind at least, proceed from the "fact" of that unity which underlies the world of apparent diversity. Good is that which makes for unity and evil that which makes for separateness. The ultimate ideal is the ideal of non-attachment, and the cultivation of this ideal depends largely upon the major virtues of love and intelligence. Any emotion or sensation which is "separative" is evil. Anger, envy, fear, pride, vanity, lust, ambition, and avarice are all evil because they make non-attachment to the things of this earth difficult. Even the development of personality, if personality is regarded as something to be developed for itself and not in order to be transcended, is evil.

The ideas of *Ends and Means* represent the *result* of Huxley's drift towards mysticism. The description of the *stages* in the development perhaps may be found in Huxley's portrayal of Anthony Beavis in *Eyeless in Gaza*. Beavis, at the outset of the novel, bears many resemblances to Philip Quarles in *Point Counter Point*. He is ethically and psychologically a relativist, and his mind is characterized by an intellectual detachment which has protected him from severe emotional disturbance or complication. Under the influence of a crisis in his relationship to his mistress, he is impelled to reconsider his past life. He decides that he has used thought and knowledge, which he sees now are really only raw materials, as ends in themselves, just as other men—D. H. Lawrence, for example,—had used undifferentiated physical life as an end in itself. Life as such, he now perceives, is not enough, and the decision indicates something of Huxley's current attitude towards the "life-worship" doctrine of *Do What You Will*. Beavis now realizes that he is on the threshold of a difficult and searching attempt to discover the proper *end* to which his mental and physical energies must be made to aspire. While on a trip to Mexico, Beavis meets his proper mentor in the person of Mr. Miller, who immediately diagnoses him as suffering from everything from improper bodily carriage to a mind untrained in the technique of mystical

contemplation. Back in England, Beavis joins Miller in spreading the gospel of pacifism and by painful cultivation of the virtue of non-attachment is finally enabled to reach a mystical contemplation of the spiritual unity which underlies all things.

In *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), Huxley withdraws even farther from an anthropocentric view of the world. Whereas in *Ends and Means* only those acts which serve as worthy means towards good ends are commended, in his latest novel Huxley views *all* our acts on the purely human level as resulting in evil. The metaphysical assumptions underlying the book concern three planes of existence, the animal, the human, and the eternal or infinite or timeless. On the animal plane, Huxley suggests, good exists in the organism's harmonious adjustment to its environment; but it is significant that this possibility of the "good" is never really explained or illustrated in the novel. On the highest level, good exists in the experience of eternity and the transcendence of personality. It requires a knowledge of the world without desire or aversion. On the strictly human plane, man can achieve nothing but evil and none of his acts is free. "God is completely present only in the complete absence of what we call our humanity. No iron necessity condemns the individual to the futile torment of being merely human."¹

Merely human! The words are painful to one who admires the Aldous Huxley of *Point Counter Point*, the Huxley who was at least groping his way towards a statement of the humanism of Montaigne in the terms of the 20th century. I am interested in tracing the changes in Huxley's ideas because I think such a study throws at least some light upon one of the strongest currents of 20th century thought—the revolt against the reason and the yielding to the siren call of supra-rationalism and the glorification of the unconscious. If Aldous Huxley were alone in tracing this course, a study of it would be of minor significance. D. H. Lawrence, who, like Huxley, very rightly detested the effects in modern life of

1. Huxley, Aldous. *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers. 1939. p. 311.

mere logic-chopping and a sterile intellectualism, went so far as to deny the validity of the reason entirely, in favor of some sub-mental, dark consciousness of the blood. That Lawrence would deplore the worst aspects of this mysticism of the unconscious as they are found in totalitarian racism and the Nazi super-consciousness of the state, I do not doubt. But the philosophical kinship exists. The movement in the 20th century from one level of life to another in the revolt against the reason is obvious. Homo-centric ethical schemes give way to biocentric ones, to theocentric or policentric. The individual human consciousness is ever threatened with submersion in a super-consciousness of class or race or nation, in a sub-consciousness of man's nocturnal life, where some dark and gibbering god sits enthroned.

That Aldous Huxley has not yet found a comfortable home in mystical ecstasy can, I think, be shown. But he is striving valiantly. Still detached, in fact more completely so in his metaphysics than ever before, he seeks to cultivate the gardens of eternity. Time is the great evil; the flux exists even if it be an illusion; we must live on a plane of eternity, for acts on the purely human level can never result in good. From what a dizzy height does he look down upon "merely human" problems, "merely human" desires. Philip Quarles was separated from the full, the good life by an excessive tendency towards pure cerebration; Aldous Huxley in 1941 is encompassed by a whole metaphysical system.

VITA

Wilson McNeil Lowry, the son of Benedict Harrison and Helen (Graham) Lowry, was born in Columbus, Kansas, February 17, 1913. He was educated in the public schools of Columbus, Kansas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and at the University of Illinois, from which he received an A.B. degree in 1934. After one year as a part-time assistant and graduate student in the Department of English at the University of Illinois, he worked on the staff of *The Social Studies Magazine* in New York City from October 1935 to May 1936. In the same year he married Elsa Koch. Since September 1936 he has been a full-time assistant and graduate student in the Department of English at Illinois. For the past year he has been an editor of *Accent: A Quarterly of New Literature*.

